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Mount Hermon (Jabal El Sheikh) in Lebanon, A Sacred Biblical Mountain: Pilgrimages, traditions and rituals

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Mount Hermon, also known as *Jabal El Haramoun* or *Jabal El Sheikh*, is the highest peak in the Anti-Lebanon eastern mountain chain, located between Lebanon, Syria, and the Israeli-Palestinian territories. Since antiquity, this mountain has been considered holy, a fact to which many archaeological remains bear testament. At present, one can count hundreds of religious sites from different religious communities including Christians – Maronite, Orthodox, Catholic, and Evangelical – as well as Sunnis and Druze. In the Bible we can find more than 70 references to Mount Hermon. It is said locally that Jesus Christ was transfigured at its top. The security issues related to this sensitive area notwithstanding, pilgrimages and rituals take place around Mount Hermon on the western Lebanese slopes, bearing witness to the importance of this sacred mountain in the beliefs of the faithful. This paper explores the inter-sectarian conviviality and natural dialogue that takes place through shared activities, pilgrimages, and rituals around Mount Hermon, contributing to the construction of local and national identities, and preserving the sacredness of the site.

Key Words: Mount Harmon, Lebanon, pilgrimage, Christian, Maronite, Orthodox, Elijah, Holy Land

Come with me from Lebanon, my bride, come with me from Lebanon! Descend from the peak of Amana, from the summits of Senir and Hermon, from the dens of the Lions, from the mountains of the Leopards (Song of Solomon 4:8).

Introduction

Mount Hermon, also known as *Jabal El Haramoun* or *Jabal El Sheikh* (the old man's mountain), is the highest peak in the Anti-Lebanon eastern mountain chain at 2,814 meters above sea level. Mount Hermon is also called the 'mountain of snow', *Jabal El Talj* (Figure 1). In Israel, the sobriquet is 'the eyes of the nation' because its elevation makes the mountain Israel's primary location for its strategic early warning systems.

Mount Hermon held great religious significance for the Canaanites and Phoenicians, who called it the seat of the Most High; archaeological remains confirm the holiness of the area. The Romans, also recognising it as a sacred site, built many temples on its slopes, among others, are those which are now called Nabi Safa, Hebbariyeh, Ain Harsha, and Yanta. The Old Testament, with over 70 references, names the mountain as 'Baal-Hermon',

while in the New Testament the mountain where the Transfiguration of Jesus took place, is designated by many as Mount Hermon.

The Transfiguration of Jesus is an episode in the New Testament in which Jesus is transfigured and becomes radiant in glory upon a mountain. Jesus and three of his disciples, namely Peter, James, and John, witnessed the event. On the mountain, Jesus begins to shine with bright rays of light. The prophets Moses and Elijah then appear next to him and he speaks with them. This is also the place where God is believed to have exclaimed:

This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to Him!'

The Transfiguration is one of the miracles of Jesus in the Gospels. This miracle is unique in that the miracle happens to Jesus himself. The Transfiguration is one of the five major milestones in the Gospel narrative of the life of Jesus, the others being his Baptism, Crucifixion, Resurrection and Ascension. In 2002, Pope John Paul II introduced the Luminous Mysteries of the Rosary, one of which is the Transfiguration.

None of the evangelists mentions the mountain by name, and as a consequence, researchers disagree about the

Figure 1: Snowy Mount Hermon as seen from Mt. Bental

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hermonsnow.jpg>

exact name and place. A controversy therefore exists regarding the geographical location of the Mount of Transfiguration. Several scholars, historians, and authors have suggested other candidates, including Mount Tabor in Israel-Palestine. However, Mount Hermon is believed to be the correct place, especially by Lebanese scholars and the local communities of the area.

The objective of this paper is not to support any of the theories but to highlight the sacredness of the Lebanese Mount Hermon area, and how locals, through religious practices and pilgrimages, contribute to the religious patrimonialization of the place.

Mount Hermon is a part of the *Djebel El Druze* or the Druze community. As Roussel (2011) explains, after the birth of the Druze religion, it could not expand into Sunni-inhabited areas, hence the Druze mountainous zones were used as a refuge. Except for the area of Ghouta, all the Druze zones are mountainous. In Lebanon, these are the Mount Hermon area, the Wadi Taym, and Mount Lebanon. The Druze use the mountains to preserve their religious heritage. Narcisse Bouron (1930:5) reports that,

for the Druze, Mount Hermon in particular took on the significance of a 'Holy Enclosure'.

This paper is part of my anthropological research to understand how holy places will contribute to the designation of Lebanon as part of the 'Holy Land'. In order to explore this theme, over 100 hours of participant observation and around 30 interviews were conducted across South Lebanon, the Mount Hermon area, and the Cedars (Besharreh) area.

There are over 96 references to Lebanon in the Bible (Old and New Testament). Jesus Christ himself is said to have walked, preached, and performed miracles between Tyre and Sidon in Lebanon. The first of these miracles is the transformation of water into wine at the Lebanese Cana (Matt 14:21-28 and Mark 7:24-31). Jesus praised the faith of the inhabitants of Tyre and Sidon, and reminded the Pharisees of an episode concerning the life of the Prophet Elijah, who, in a time of famine, was said to have been fed by a widow of Sarepta (the coastal city now known as Sarafand, south of Sidon). It is also believed that Jesus Christ was transfigured at the

Figure 2: Map of Lebanon illustrating location of Mount Hermon

https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/fb/Lebanon_2002_CIA_map.jpg

top of Mount Hermon. For most of the Lebanese sites mentioned in the Bible, no controversy exists regarding the exact geographical location, but some locations are still disputed and controversial, like Cana and the Mount of the Transfiguration. We know that Christian communities were present in Lebanon from the apostolic period onward. Saint Paul also visited Lebanon many times, traveling through different coastal cities such as Tabarja and Tyre (Figure 2).

Despite the biblical references and the many pilgrims and testimonies from orientalists, Lebanon has been excluded from the topography of the 'Holy Land', a concept exclusively reserved for Palestine / Israel, even as it has more recently extended to Jordan. In May 1997, Pope Jean Paul II during a visit to Lebanon, proclaimed it as a Holy Land for its privileged place in the Bible, its martyrs, and its sacred places. Following this statement, many civil society initiatives attempted to place Lebanon on the international tourism map of the Holy Land as 'Lebanon, Holy Land' and 'In the Footsteps of Jesus

Christ in Lebanon.' Authors including Roncaglia (2004), Harb (2008), and Abou Nakoul (2013) followed this approach, which relies particularly on the writings of the historian Eusebius of Caesarea, who located the evangelical Cana in the land of Asher near Tyre.

Political and geographical tensions and concerns in the area have excluded Lebanon from the Holy Land tourism market. The opening of the borders between Jordan and Israel has allowed the establishment of new, combined pilgrimage routes, further isolating Lebanon from Jerusalem, the centre of the Holy Land.

This paper represents an invitation to the reader to discover holy sites at the foot of the sacred mountain from different religious communities, as well as religious ceremonies and cults. Security issues notwithstanding, pilgrimages and rituals take place around Mount Hermon on the western Lebanese slopes and testify to the importance of this sacred mountain in the beliefs of the faithful.

Mount Hermon, Rachaya area, Hasbaya, and Wadi El Taym

The physical geography and landscape of Lebanon is extremely complex and varied. Four distinct physiographic regions may be distinguished in the country: a narrow coastal plain along the Mediterranean Sea, the Mount Lebanon western mountain chain, the fertile Beqaa Valley and the Anti-Lebanon eastern mountain chain. The highest summit of Mount Lebanon is Qurnat As Sawda', which is 3,087 meters at its peak. The Anti-Lebanon Mountains constitute a natural border with Syria and its highest peak is Mount Hermon.

Eternal snow covers some of its peaks and the last wild bears presently hide somewhere in this area between Lebanon, Syria and Israel/Palestine. A UN post, staffed with Austrian soldiers, is located at the summit of Mount Hermon and is responsible for keeping the borders between the three countries secure. The headquarters of the United Nations Disengagement Observer Force (UNDOF) was established in 1974, after the agreed disengagement of the Israeli and Syrian forces on the Golan Heights, with the aim of supervising the implementation of the agreement and maintaining the cease-fire. This Buffer Zone between Lebanon and Syrian-Israeli occupied territories is the highest permanently manned United Nations position in the world, known as 'Hermon Hotel'. The international force erected a cross on the peak made from shrapnel leftovers, to pay homage to the religious significance of the area.

The southern slopes of Mount Hermon extend to the Israeli-occupied portion of the Golan Heights, where the Mount Hermon ski resort is located; the larger part of Mount Hermon within the Israeli-controlled area constitutes the Hermon nature reserve. The range, with the Lebanon-Syria boundary along its spine, extends from 25 kilometers northeast of Mount Hermon to 45 kilometers southwest of it.

The mountain forms one of the greatest geographic resources of the area. Because of its height, it captures a great deal of precipitation in this very dry area of the world. Water trickling down from the snow-covered mountain's western and southern bases seeps into the rock channels and pores, feeding springs at the base of the mountain, from which rivers and streams ensue, providing an abundant plant life below the snow line. The springs, and the mountain itself, given the benefit

from such a water supply, are much contested by the nations around the area. From the Lebanese / west side of the mountain, many villages are spread all over the rural area at the base of Mount Hermon.

We must go back to the roots of the name 'Lebanon' to understand the importance of the Lebanese mountains and the high peaks. The name of Lebanon comes from the Semitic root *lbn* (*laban*, literally: yogurt), meaning 'white', as in the white mountain of Canaan, referring to the snow covering its mountain peaks even in summertime. Travellers and caravans crossing the area would spot these eternal snows from far away, especially if they were coming from the desert and other similarly dry areas. These Lebanese mountains are the highest range overlooking the Eastern Mediterranean, and thus, are a symbol of fertility, offering water in abundance.

Mount Hermon is actually a cluster of mountains with three distinct summits, each about the same height. One of the peaks of Hermon was called by the inhabitants and the shepherds *Tallet El Massih* (the Hill of Christ), with an altitude of 1,950 meters. Additionally, one of the valleys surrounding this summit is called *Wadi Al Raheb* (the Valley of the Monks). This terminology supports, along with the local beliefs, the idea that the transfiguration of Jesus Christ took place on this Mount.

The area for exploration at the foot of Mount Hermon, a very fertile zone, combines two districts, Rachaya and Hasbaya. Numerous mixed villages are spread all over the rural area, inhabited by Druze and Christians, with a minority of Sunni Muslims.

A Multi-confessional Mosaic of Religious Sites in the Mount Hermon area: Biblical prophets and saints

Mount Hermon is a site with profound spirituality and is rich in sacred symbols. It holds a great religious significance, from antiquity until the present day, for the Canaanites and Phoenicians, the Greeks and the Romans, the Jews, Christians and Muslims. Archaeological remains and historical monuments spread around the Hermon area testify to this sacredness. The mountains were considered the seats of the gods, and thus, altars and temples have been set up on their summits. The mountain was considered by its inhabitants as a source of fertility and blessings of all kinds, and this belief survives to the present day.

Mount Hermon was called *Sirion* by the Phoenicians and *Hermon* in the Old Testament. This sacred mountain was renamed *Jabal El Sheikh* (the old man's mountain) in the sixteenth century.

The Canaanites and Phoenicians worshipped Baal Hermon, i.e. Lord of Hermon, and set up his symbolic throne on the mountain's summit. There are remains of a sacred building, made of hewn blocks of stone, on the summit of Mount Hermon. Known as *Qasr Antar*, the temple of Baal Hermon was built on the highest location known in the ancient world. One of the sacred names of Mount Hermon is *Atr*, which the inhabitants of the region modify to *Antar*. In fact, traces of an ancient cult still remain at Qasr Antar, which is a rock in the form of a cone, measuring an average of nearly six meters in height, surrounded by an oval stone enclosure (Harb, 2008).

During the Roman period, just like Mount Lebanon, Mount Carmel, and Mount Cassius, this summit was considered a sacred place and a divine residence, and this belief is confirmed by the presence of many temples. The area has the largest number of temples found in any region in the world. Many of these Roman temples can still be seen and visited on the mountain and in villages, such as the temple of Ain Harsha, the temple of Hebbariyeh, the temple of Yanta, and the Dar El Achayer. The mountain is described in the Song of Solomon as 'the tower of Lebanon, which looketh toward Damascus'. The name *Haramoun* comes from *Haram*, meaning a sacred place of the Lord / God, that which should not be profaned.

Many of the Druze *maqams* that one may visit today are built around or on top of antique remains. Most of the sanctuaries in the area have a very long history and date back to pre-Christian and Islamic times. Russel (2011) reports how archaeologists observe the salvaging of ancient remains by the Druze when they settled in these mountainous areas. Around Mount Hermon, they reused such remains for their religious sites. As the French nineteenth-century thinker Ernest writes:

The sacred will replace the sacred (Renan, 1997).

The Druze have a special devotion for the biblical prophets, like Nabi Shouaïb, with two *maqams* dedicated to him in the area, and Nabi Shiit (the prophet Seth). Many biblical figures are common referents for the faithful of the three monotheistic branches, as Jews, Christians and Muslims share a prophetic heritage.

While the Qur'an ignores certain major biblical prophets (Isaiah and Jeremiah for example), it mentions numerous others unknown to Christians (*Sâlih*, *Shouaïb*). However, a shared prophetic heritage means that in sanctuaries of the biblical prophets, followers of the different religions are regularly crossing paths and meet with each other. Of all the biblical saints, worship sites dedicated to Saint Elijah are by far the most prevalent, with 262 shrines in Lebanon devoted to him. More than a dozen Muslim shrines in Lebanon are also dedicated to him under the name of *Nabi Ayla* or *Nabi Yassine*. In the Mount Hermon area, some churches are dedicated to Saint Elijah, as in Ain Ata. Druze also venerate holy figures exclusive to their religion, as with Cheikh Fadel in Ain Ata or Sitt Salha in Mimes village. Due to the reputation of their miracles, benedictions and graces, many faithful from other religious communities also visit these shrines.

Today, many religious sites from different religious communities can be inspected and are still visited by the faithful. The inhabitants of this area are mostly Druze and Christians, but there are some villages also inhabited by Sunni Muslims. Most of the localities are multi-confessional, where one can find churches side by side with mosques or *maqam* and *Khelwet* (Druze houses of prayer), testifying to the 'living-together' which is a reality in Lebanon. Ain Ata, for example, has one of the most important Druze sanctuaries. Maqam Cheikh El Fadel also hosts a small community of Orthodox Christians, with their church of El Nabi Eliya (St Elijah). In Shebaa, there are mosques, one of them historical, as the village is inhabited by a majority of Sunni Muslims; but a minority of Orthodox Christians gathers around Mar Jiryès (St George) Church. In Hasbaya, many churches can be seen, and a few kilometres away from the historical centre of the town, the famous Druze site of *Khalewet El Bayyada* (White Houses of Communion) are recognized as the major school of Druze theology in Lebanon.

Mar Jiryès, Saint George, is the most venerated saint in Lebanon after the Virgin Mary. He is the most popular saint in the country, with 350 Christian sites and about 20 Muslim sites dedicated to Al Khodr. Saint George (*Mar Jiryès* or *Al Khodr*), is therefore highly venerated by Christians, Muslims, and the Druze alike, as he is universally beloved. Marvellous legends, transported all the way to Europe, tell of his heroism and passion. The legend of Saint George and the dragon has been recounted from generation to generation in many different ways. The

Church classifies him in the category of military saints, and he is almost always represented in armour, astride a horse. Saint George is the 'mega-martyr,' the patron saint of Beirut, whose name varies in Arabic: *Al Qedis Jirjis*, *Jerios*, *Jourios*, *Jawarjios*, *Jorjos*, *Djirjis*, *Jirjis*, *Kevork* among Armenians, and *Korkis* among the Syriacs. Saint George can be identified with the Koranic figure of Al-Khadir, or 'the green man,' who is also known as *Khidr*, *Khader*, *Hadir*, or *Hizir*. While he is not mentioned by name in the Qur'an, he is identified with the Servant of God who accompanies Moses in Sura XVIII. Although the Qur'an says little about him, Al-Khadir enjoys great popularity.

In the rural region of Mount Hermon there are about a dozen religious shrines dedicated to him, like the church of Hasbaya (a.k.a. Shebaa) and the Al Khodr Mar Jiryas sanctuary of Aita El Fokhar.

He is also a saint especially venerated by the Druze. In many Druze shrines one can find icons and statues of St George, as in the Hall of Prayer in the Maqam of Nabi Shiit (Khalawat). In Qabou Amha, an Orthodox church dedicated to Mar Jiryas (St George), is less visited than the site allegedly showing the hoof prints of the saint's horse. The reputation of the site for benedictions and graces attracts faithful from different religious communities. At the entrance of the fenced rock, where one can observe the horse's hoof prints, is a glass closet with a stand to light candles and a place for offerings, especially brooms. The Druze faithful in particular, offer brooms during their votive pilgrimages, believing that their sins will be swept away. Thus cleaned from their sins, it is much more tenable that their vows will be realised.

The two major localities in the area are Rachaya El Wadi and Hasbaya, with the aforementioned Wadi El Taym, hosting numerous important religious sites.

Rachaya El Wadi is a picturesque little town with red-roofed houses at an altitude of 1,360 meters, seated on the western slopes of Mount Hermon, ensconced in the northern side of the valley known as Wadi El Taym, from where several water courses flow to feed the River Jordan. Rachaya El Wadi offers visitors a delightful, natural setting, with its high plateau overlooking the Beqaa Valley, terraced gardens, thousands of red-brick houses, and a stone-paved main street known as the 'souk' (market) leading up to the Citadel of Independence. In Rachaya, there are four churches alongside the Druze

Khelweh (House of Prayer): the Greek Catholic church of Our Lady of Deliverance, *Saydet El Najat*, the Syriac church of *Mar Moussa (Moises) El Habashi* (seventeenth century), and the two Orthodox churches, the first of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, *Milad El Saydeh* (nineteenth century, but built on the foundations of an tenth-century church), and the second of Saint Nicolas, associated with the Archbishopric. This town also hosts a small Orthodox oratory dedicated to Mar Mtanious (Saint Anthony). In addition to these, there also stands at the entrance of the town a centuries-old oak tree, said to be sacred: Em El Charateet (the mother of the laces). Worshipers hang a strip of their clothes on the branches of this 'tree of wishes', to ask for safe travel abroad, passing an exam, giving safe birth, marrying and interceding for the healing of a sick person. Residents of the area consider this tree a 'blessed tree', especially because Al Cheick Al Fadel used to sit under the shade of its branches. The site of the tree is an inter-religious meeting place of the faithful from different religious communities.

The town of **Hasbaya** is the centre of the *caza* and can be reached from Marjeyoun across Hasbani Bridge. It is the capital of Wadi El Taym, a long fertile valley running parallel to the western foot of Mount Hermon. Watered by the Hasbani river, the low hills of Wadi El Taym are covered with rows of silver-green olive trees. The oldest standing ruins date from the Crusades. The Shehabs conquered the area in 1173 and transformed the crusader fort into a huge palace, with 65 rooms with beautiful wall paintings. The castle in Hasbaya was held by the crusaders under the Count of Toron, but in 1171 the Emirs of the Shehab family defeated the crusaders in several battles. Hasbaya is mainly inhabited by the Druze, together with some Christian families. In 1826, an American Protestant mission was established in the town. The Ottoman authorities recognised the Evangelical (Protestant) faith in 1848, and the first churches were founded in Beirut and in Hasbaya (1852) on the slopes of Mount Hermon. During the war from 1975 to 1990, Hasbaya's evangelical church and its installations suffered terribly from bombings and military intrusions, and was completely abandoned. In the town one can also find a historical mosque related to the famous citadel, the Serail, and six other churches related to the Orthodox and Maronite communities. The Orthodox churches in Hasbaya are Mar Jiryas (Saint George), Al Saydeh (Our Lady), Mar Nkoula (Saint Nicolas), and there are also the remains of a small *mazar* dedicated to the Virgin Mary.

Located near Hasbaya are the *Khalawat El Bayyada*, the above mentioned White Houses of Communion. This is the location where Ad Darazi is supposed to have settled and taught from during the first Druze call. It features a large, circular stone bench next to a centuries-old oak tree. If one stands in the middle of the circle (first removing one's shoes, according to custom), speaking out loud, one will hear an uncanny near-simultaneous echo. The same structure can be observed by the *maqam* of Nabi Hezekiel (Prophet Ezekiel) in Debbine. The Khalawat provides around forty hermitages for the *Uqqal* (the initiated), where thousands of initiates arrive each Thursday on spiritual retreats. It is from here that, in the early eleventh century, the Druze faith was spread. A calm, spiritual atmosphere reigns over the Khalawat, and the scenery of Mount Hermon, *Jabal El Sheikh*, is breathtaking and inspiring for prayer.

Pilgrimages, Rituals, and Activities

Through my field work I observed both individual votive pilgrimages and rituals and secular activities, usually interacting with religious events and ceremonies.

In contrast with codified religiosity, believers from different religious communities have developed a less constrained version through the *ziyarat* (visits to religious sites and / or saints). Many of the religious sites in the Mount Hermon area are visited daily by the faithful looking for *baraka*, i.e. benedictions and graces. Through rituals, people express their piety and their need to create a relationship between their daily existence, their problems and the saints. These visits and rituals show a significant degree of commonality within and among the religions present there. Sublimation of social references is then observed; gender, social class, and religion have no place in saint worship and thus do not play any role in the achievement or success of the vow. Many sites from different religious communities are renowned for their *baraka*, their benedictions and graces, and attract faithful from various sects (Farra Haddad, 2016).

The concept of *baraka* is central to the *ziyarat*, the pilgrimage to shrines. The saints and their shrines are a source of grace and benediction and this is transmitted to ordinary people. Physical contact with a shrine and the tomb of a saint (*darih*) emits *baraka*, the blessings the faithful require for protection in their daily lives or for help in exceptionally difficult situations. Pilgrims from all religious communities believe that *baraka* has a positive

effect and therefore holy places are visited in order to receive graces, to make or to fulfil vows. To maximise the chances of a wish being granted, *baraka* must be obtained. In Syria, as in Lebanon, the transmission of *baraka* is at the heart of shared ritual actions, performed in the context of vows (Fartacek, 2012). Most of the shared religious sanctuaries in Lebanon have a very long history dating back to pre-Christian and Islamic times, and *baraka* is transferred from one religion to another, as in the case of the shrines in the Mount Hermon area.

Various secular activities are also organised around the Mount Hermon area, like hikes and festivals, but the major event planned in the area was, from 1996, the feast of the Transfiguration of Jesus Christ, *Eid El Tajalli*. For the locals - Christians, Muslims and Druze - there is no controversy possible regarding the geographical location of the Transfiguration, and Jesus himself climbed this mountain. Since 1996, a small group of Lebanese people has climbed to the top of Mount Hermon annually for the feast of Jesus' Transfiguration on 5 August, staying on the mountain overnight until 6 August. The group includes people from various denominations (Christians, Muslims, and Druze), and a Maronite Mass was celebrated on the mountaintop. The trekking may either start from Chebaa (1,600 meters), or from Wadi Jeneem above the village of Chebaa, and also from Ain Sabroune.

In 2001, the municipality of Rachaya, using the labels of 'religious tourism' and 'walk where Jesus walked', supported and sponsored the event, mobilising about 200 hikers. This activity was organised in the frame of genuine and natural interreligious solidarity. Ever since, Rachaya Municipality organises an annual procession to Mount Hermon on the occasion of Transfiguration Day. In 2005, the municipality constructed a road for jeeps, reaching an altitude of 2,400 meters to facilitate ascension toward the peak. Mixed opinions about the environmental and cultural aspects of this road, as well as its function and necessity, were expressed. The municipality also supported the building of a camping site and organising trips to the top.

The 2006 climb, however, was cancelled on account of war. After 2006 Rachaya Municipality once again organised the annual procession to Mount Hermon for the occasion of Transfiguration Day. About a thousand people, coming from several Lebanese regions, took part in the seven-hour march from Rachaya to the summit of Mount Hermon. When Syria, Lebanon's neighbour,

with very strong ties to its internal politics, fell into civil war in 2011, Lebanon's own security was affected. The proximity to Syria and the regular influx of refugees, ongoing cattle rustling, and the tension which border conflicts bring, are concerns to any potential activity close to the border. These resulted in the complete cancellation of the hike toward Mount Hermon in 2103 for security reasons and this lasted until 2018.

On 5 August 2018, the municipality of Rachaya El Wadi organised a moderate hike along the foot of Mount Hermon, without targeting the summit, followed by a mass in the area. After celebrating the Eucharist, a rural traditional lunch was offered to all participants. About 150 people took part in this event but unfortunately for several reasons in 2019 and 2020, the hike and the feast were not organised officially. Inhabitants of the Rachaya area, both Druze and Christians, feel responsible for the promotion of this sacred area and are very enthusiastic to plan for this important event in August every year.

Patrimonialization, Living Together, Interreligious Solidarity, and Natural Dialogue

The Druze in Syria and Palestine-Israel mostly live in homogeneous villages and cities, and avoid mingling with other religious communities (Roussel, 2011). By contrast, Lebanon, specifically in the Mount Hermon area, is populated by mixed religious communities, where Druze live side by side with Christians (Maronites, Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox, and Protestants) and Sunni Muslims. Sanctuaries are visited by devotees from different denominations. In the worship sites I observed, the faithful mention common references between the Bible and the Qur'an, and are proud to have common roots. I frequently heard statements such as

Nehna min salli la nafes el anbiya

(We pray to the same prophets)

and

Nehna kelna min emen enno El masih tjallah hon'

(We all believe that Jesus transfigured here).

The use of the 'we' in this context is very important and meaningful. The faithful seem to believe in one common religious heritage and the patrimonialization of different religious sites can be carried out by all the communities.

As has been done for South Lebanon, this discussion seeks to understand the desire of integrating the religious and pilgrimage sites of the Mount Hermon area in the biblical and evangelical tradition, supported by renewed interest in these sites and the establishment of programs to organise visits to such sanctuaries. This promotion, under themes like 'walk where Jesus walked', targets not only foreigners, but also the local Lebanese.

Local communities visit and surround these holy places with their popular religiosity, transmitting their reputation and the story of the miracles attributed to them. Di Méo (2008) counts different milestones in the process of patrimonialization:

- heritage awareness,
- the presence of key actors and the implementation of conservation, and
- exposure and valorization initiatives of heritage.

My field work showed a development and a promotion of Mount Hermon as a sacred mountain. The local re-conceptualisation of sacred heritage is put forward by the inhabitants of Rachaya and Hasbaya who are involved in public projects for sustainable religious tourism development, as carried out by the municipality of Rachaya. The current president of the municipality of Rashaya is Druze, and he is working hard with the Christian Vice President, the Greek Orthodox Parish and Bishopric and local NGOs, such as 'Rashaya and Beyond', *Nehna Rashaya* (We are Rashaya) to develop the promotion and the organisation of the Feast of the Transfiguration as the major activity of the year in the town.

The faithful are also aware that, in many worship sites, an inter-religious conviviality is experienced. Given the breadth of the number of worship sites in the Mount Hermon area, as well as the volume of visits made by the faithful of different communities, many pilgrimages go beyond what can be classified as monolithically religious.

Even as the patrimonialization process is launched, the area is still waiting for recognition and promotion. None of the brochures edited by the Ministry of Tourism (MOT) or the information displayed on the website of the MOT develop the theme of the Transfiguration on Mount Hermon nor promote the area as a sacred area of interest for religious tourism. On the other hand, the local authorities in the area, especially the municipality of Rachaya, are asking for official recognition of

the area as a sacred mountain. We can also consider this demonstration as Halbwachs (2008), the great sociologist of memory did: the creation and evolution of pious traditions and the foundation of holy places depends upon the changing needs of the faithful, without necessarily taking into consideration the historicity of the testimonies. Thus, we need to reflect on the extent to which the patrimonialization of the places of worship that we observe arises from the needs of stakeholders? Or is it really based on historical realities?

It would be interesting to look at issues of identity and also at the exploitation of this heritage valorization, which passes through a dynamic that is developed by initiators (authors, NGOs, and policymakers, among others), but also by participants and domestic actors such as local populations and tourists. A more in-depth reflection on the dynamics of territorial heritage claims could allow us to better understand and analyse the involvement of each of these actors and the role that they play in this valorization strategy.

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